

ALL IN

A short story by ELLEN SUSSMAN

“I’m all in,” Zoe says, pushing her massive pile of poker chips to the centre of the table.

“She’s got nothing,” I say.

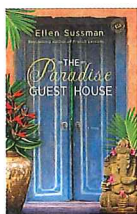
Zoe plays like a wild woman in the last 20 minutes of the game. She told us once: “I want to go home with lots of money or no money.” In her life, Zoe plays it safe – with a husband who ignores her, a dead-end job at the bank, clothing that makes her disappear in its folds. But on Monday nights, at Estrogen Poker, while we’re all finishing the last of the wine and cake, she’s on a tear.

“Call me,” she dares. She looks me in the eye, something Zoe rarely does. And in that look I see someone else, someone bold.

So I call her bet, pushing my own stacks of chips into the centre of the table.

There’s a lot of money in the pot. The six of us lean in close. A few years ago I hired a crazy Russian lady to teach us how to play Texas Hold ‘Em. Now we play like pros. I keep talking about a trip to Vegas, but no one else seems to care. This is what we wait for: Monday nights in my living room. The first time we played I put out whiskey and cigars, but it’s a red wine and chocolate crowd – there’s no pretending otherwise. We play cards and talk. Some of the talk is serious – someone’s kid got busted at school for selling weed, someone’s husband lost his job, someone’s got a crush on her best friend’s guy.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS HARDY



ELLEN SUSSMAN was born in Trenton, New Jersey and lives with her husband and two daughters in the San Francisco Bay Area. She’s the author of the novels *French Lessons* and *On a Night Like This* and her third, *The Paradise Guest House* (Corsair) is published this month.

Every once in a while, we forget the game and the conversation sweeps us in, but soon enough one of us says, “Your deal.”

I lay down a straight – I’m pretty sure that sweet pot is mine. Zoe often bluffs up a storm in the last 20 minutes. Maybe she thinks we’re looped or buzzed from too much sugar.

“Show me, sister,” I tell her.

She places her cards in the middle of the table like an artist revealing her masterpiece. A flush. The winning hand. The women whoop it up.

Zoe gathers in that pile of chips, a lovely smile on her face. While we pack away the game and clear the glasses – we are good women again, cleaning up the place – Zoe counts her money.

“Imagine if I played like this every day,” she says. Already her voice sounds different – a little stronger, a little more sure.

“Try it,” I tell her.

I imagine this: She tells her husband: love me more. She quits her job and opens a yoga studio. She buys a red sequined dress, body-hugging of course, and stiletto heels. But this is Monday night and anything seems possible at Estrogen Poker.

She tucks the bills into her purse and stands tall. “Move over, world,” she says.

We step aside and she struts out the door, heading somewhere new. **S**



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FAVOURITE BEDTIME SNACK? A small scoop of Dulce de Leche ice cream.